X

OF THE

CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

BY

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OF THE

CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

SECTION I.

I. General diviſion of the following diſcourſe, with regard to Pagan and Jewiſh authors, who mention particulars relating to our Saviour.

II. Not probable that any ſuch ſhould be mentioned by Pagan writers who lived at the ſame time, from the nature of ſuch tranſactions.

III. Eſpecially when related by the Jews.

IV. And heard at a diſtance by thoſe who pretended to as great miracles as their own.

V. Beſides that, no Pagan writers of that age lived in Judea or its confines.

VI. And becauſe many books of that age are loſt.

VII. An inſtance of one record proved to be authentick.

VIII. A ſecond record of probable, though not undoubted, authority.

I. THAT I may lay before you a full ſtate of the ſubject under our conſideration, and methodize the ſeveral particulars that I touched upon in diſcourſe

with you; I ſhall firſt take notice of ſuch Pagan authors as have given their teſtimony to the hiſtory of our Saviour; reduce theſe authors under their reſpective claſſes, and ſhew what authority their teſtimonies carry with them. Secondly, I ſhall take notice of Jewiſh authors in the ſame light.

II. There are many reaſons, why you ſhould not expect that matters of ſuch a wonderful nature ſhould be taken notice of by thoſe eminent Pagan writers, who were contemporaries with Jeſus Chriſt, or by thoſe who lived before his diſciples had perſonally appeared among them, and aſcertained the report which had gone abroad concerning a life ſo full of miracles.

Suppoſing ſuch things had happened at this day in Switzerland, or among the Griſons, who make a greater figure in Europe than Judaea did in the Roman empire, would they be immediately believed by thoſe who live at a great diſtance from them? or would any certain account of them be tranſmitted into foreign countries, within ſo ſhort a ſpace of time as that of our Saviour's publick miniſtry? ſuch kinds of news, though never ſo true, ſeldom gain credit, 'till ſome time after they are tranſacted and expoſed to the examination of the curious, who by laying together circumſtances, atteſtations, and characters of thoſe who are concerned in them, either receive, or reject what at firſt none but

eye-witneſſes could abſolutely believe or diſbelieve. In a caſe of this ſort, it was natural for men of ſenſe and learning to treat the whole account as fabulous or at fartheſt to ſuſpend their belief of it, until all things ſtood together in their full light.

III. Beſides, the Jews were branded not only for ſuperſtitions different from all the religions of the Pagan world, but in a particular manner ridiculed for being a credulous people; ſo that whatever reports of ſuch a nature came out of that country, were looked upon by the heathen world as falſe, frivolous, and improbable.

IV. We may further obſerve that the ordinary practice of magic in thoſe times, with the many pretended prodigies, divinations, apparitions, and local miracles among the Heathens, made them leſs attentive to ſuch news from Judaea, 'till they had time to conſider the nature, the occaſion, and the end of our Saviour's miracles, and were awakened by many ſurprizing events to allow them any conſideration at all.

V. We are indeed told by St. Matthew, that the fame of our Saviour, during his life, went throughout all Syria, and that there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, Judaea, Decapolis, Idumaea, from beyond Jordan, and from Tyre and Sidon. Now had there been any hiſtorians of thoſe times and places, we might have expected to have

ſeen in them ſome account of thoſe wonderful tranſactions in Judaea; but there is not any ſingle author extant, in any kind, of that age, in any of thoſe countries.

VI. How many books have periſhed in which poſſibly there might have been mention of our Saviour? look among the Romans, how few of their writings are come down to our times? in the ſpace of two hundred years from our Saviour's birth, when there was ſuch a multitude of writers in all kinds, how ſmall is the number of authors that have made their way to the preſent age?

VII. One authentick record, and that the moſt authentick heathen record, we are pretty ſure is loſt. I mean the account ſent by the governor of Judaea, under whom our Saviour was judged, condemned, and crucified. It was the cuſtom in the Roman empire, as it is to this day in all the governments of the world, for the praefects and vice-roys of diſtant provinces to tranſmit to their Sovereign a ſummary relation of every thing remarkable in their adminiſtration. That Pontius Pilate, in his account, would have touched on ſo extraordinary an event in Judaea, is not to be doubted; and that he actually did, we learn from Juſtin Martyr, who lived about a hundred years after our Saviour's death, reſided, made converts, and ſuffered martyrdom at Rome, where he was engaged with philoſophers, and in a particular manner with Creſ-

eens the Cynick, who could eaſily have detected, and would not fail to have expoſed him, had he quoted a record not in being, or made any falſe citation out of it. Would the great apologiſt have challenged Creſcens to diſpute the cauſe of Chriſtianity with him before the Roman ſenate, had he forged ſuch an evidence; or would Creſcens have refuſed the challenge, could he have triumphed over him in the detection of ſuch a forgery? to which we muſt add, that the apology which appeals to this record, was preſented to a learned emperor, and to the whole body of the Roman ſenate. This father in his apology, ſpeaking of the death and ſuffering of our Saviour, refers the emperor for the truth of what he ſays to the acts of Pontius Pilate, which I have here mentioned. Tertullian, who wrote his apology about fifty years after Juſtin, doubtleſs referred to the ſame record, when he tells the governor of Rome, that the emperor Tiberius having received an account out of Paleſtine in Syria of the divine perſon, who had appeared in that country, paid him a particular regard, and threatned to puniſh any who ſhould accuſe the Chriſtians; nay, that the emperor would have adopted him among the deities whom they worſhipped, had not the ſenate refuſed to come into his propoſal. Tertullian, who gives us this hiſtory, was not only one of the moſt learned men of his age, but what adds a greater weight to his

authority in this caſe, was eminently ſkilful and well read in the laws of the Roman empire. Nor can it be ſaid, that Tertullian grounded his quotation upon the authority of Juſtin Martyr, becauſe we find he mixes it with matters of fact which are not related by that author. Euſebius mentions the ſame ancient record, but as it was not extant in his time, I ſhall not inſiſt upon his authority in this point. If it be objected that this particular is not mentioned in any Roman hiſtorian, I ſhall uſe the ſame argument in a parallel caſe, and ſee whether it will carry any force with it. Ulpian the great Roman lawyer gathered together all the imperial edicts that had been made againſt the Chriſtians. But did any one ever ſay that there had been no ſuch edicts, becauſe they were not mentioned in the hiſtories of thoſe emperors? beſides, who knows but this circumſtance of Tiberius was mentioned in other hiſtorians that have been loſt, though not to be found in any ſtill extant? has not Suetonius many particulars of this emperor omitted by Tacitus, and Herodian many that are not ſo much as hinted at by either? as for the ſpurious Acts of Pilate, now extant, we know the occaſion and time of their writing, and that had there not been a true and authentick record of this nature, they would never have been forged.

VIII. The ſtory of Agbarus King of Edeſſa, relating to the letter which he ſent to our

Saviour, and to that which he received from him, is a record of great authority; and though I will not inſiſt upon it, may venture to ſay, that had we ſuch an evidence for any fact in Pagan hiſtory, an author would be thought very unreaſonable who ſhould reject it. I believe you will be of my opinion, if you will peruſe, with other authors, who have appeared in vindication of theſe letters as genuine, the additional arguments which have been made uſe of by the late famous and learned Dr. Grabe, in the ſecond volume of his Spicilegium.

SECTION II.

I. What facts in the hiſtory of our Saviour might be taken notice of by Pagan authors.
II. What particular facts are taken notice of, and by what Pagan authors.
III. How Celſus repreſented our Saviour's miracles.
IV. The ſame repreſentation made of them by other unbelievers, and proved unreaſonable.
V. What facts in our Saviour's hiſtory not to be expected from Pagan writers.

I. WE now come to conſider what undoubted authorities are extant among Pagan writers; and here we muſt pre-

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I. WE now come to conſider what undoubted authorities are extant among Pagan writers; and here we muſt pre-

miſe, that ſome parts of our Saviour's hiſtory may be reaſonably expected from Pagans. I mean ſuch parts as might be known to thoſe who lived at a diſtance from Judaea, as well as to thoſe who were the followers and eye-witneſſes of Chriſt.

II. Such particulars are moſt of theſe which follow, and which are all atteſted by ſome one or other of thoſe heathen authors, who lived in or near the age of our Saviour and his diſciples. 'That Auguſtus Caeſar had or-'dered the whole empire to be cenſed or tax-'ed,' which brought our Saviour's reputed parents to Bethlehem. This is mentioned by ſeveral Roman hiſtorians, as Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dion. 'That a great light, or a new 'ſtar appeared in the eaſt, which directed the 'wiſe men to our Saviour:' this is recorded by Chalcidius. 'That Herod the king of Pa-'leſtine, ſo often mentioned in the Roman 'hiſtory, made a great ſlaughter of innocent 'children,' being ſo jealous of his ſucceſſor, that he put to death his own ſons on that account: this character of him is given by ſeveral hiſtorians, and this cruel fact mentioned by Macrobius, a heathen author, who tells it as a known thing, without any mark or doubt upon it. 'That our Saviour had been 'in Egypt:' this Celſus, though he raiſes a monſtrous ſtory upon it, is ſo far from denying, that he tells us our Saviour learned the arts of magic in that country. 'That Pontius

'Pilate was governor of Judaea; that our 'Saviour was brought in judgment before 'him, and by him condemned and crucified:' this is recorded by Tacitus. 'That many mi-'raculous cures and works out of the ordi-'nary courſe of nature were wrought by him:' this is confeſſed by Julian the apoſtate, Porphyry, and Hierocles, all of them not only Pagans, but profeſſed enemies and perſecutors of Chriſtianity. 'That our Saviour foretold ſe-'veral things which came to paſs according to 'his predictions:' this was atteſted by Phlegon in his annals, as we are aſſured by the learned Origen againſt Celſus. 'That at the 'time when our Saviour died, there was a 'miraculous darkneſs and a great earth-'quake:' this is recorded by the ſame Phlegon the Trallian, who was likewiſe a Pagan and freeman to Adrian the emperor. We may here obſerve, that a native of Trallium, which was not ſituate at ſo great a diſtance from Paleſtine, might very probably be informed of ſuch remarkable events as had paſſed among the Jews in the age immediately preceding his own times, ſince ſeveral of his countrymen with whom he had converſed, might have received a confuſed report of our Saviour before his crucifixion, and probably lived within the ſhake of the earthquake, and the ſhadow of the eclipſe, which are recorded by this author. 'That Chriſt was worſhipped 'as a God among the Chriſtians; that they

'would rather ſuffer death than blaſpheme 'him: that they received a ſacrament, and by 'it entred into a vow of abſtaining from ſin 'and wickedneſs,' conformable to the advice given by St. Paul; 'that they had private 'aſſemblies of worſhip, and uſed to join toge-'ther in hymns:' this is the account which Pliny the younger gives of Chriſtianity in his days, about ſeventy years after the death of Chriſt, and which agrees in all its circumſtances with the accounts we have in holy writ, of the firſt ſtate of Chriſtianity after the crucifixion of our bleſſed Saviour. 'That 'St. Peter, whoſe miracles are many of them 'recorded in holy writ, did many wonderful 'works,' is owned by Julian the apoſtate, who therefore repreſents him as a great magician, and one who had in his poſſeſſion a book of magical ſecrets left him by our Saviour. 'That 'the devils or evil ſpirits were ſubject to them,' we may learn from Porphyry, who objects to Chriſtianity, that ſince Jeſus had begun to be worſhipped, Aeſculapius and the reſt of the gods did no more converſe with men. Nay, Celſus himſelf affirms the ſame thing in effect, when he ſays, that the power which ſeemed to reſide in Chriſtians, proceeded from the uſe of certain names, and the invocation of certain daemons. Origen remarks on this paſſage, that the author doubtleſs hints at thoſe Chriſtians who put to flight evil ſpirits, and healed thoſe who were poſſeſſed with them;

a fact which had been often ſeen, and which he himſelf had ſeen, as he declares in another part of his diſcourſe againſt Celſus. But at the ſame time he aſſures us, that this miraculous power was exerted by the uſe of no other name but that of Jeſus, to which were added ſeveral paſſages in his hiſtory, but nothing like any invocation to Daemons.

III. Celſus was ſo hard ſet with the report of our Saviour's miracles, and the confident atteſtations concerning him, that though he often intimates he did not believe them to be true, yet knowing he might be ſilenced in ſuch an anſwer, provides himſelf with another retreat, when beaten out of this; namely, that our Saviour was a magician. Thus he compares the feeding of ſo many thouſands at two different times with a few loaves and fiſhes, to the magical feaſts of thoſe Egyptian impoſtors, who would preſent their ſpectators with viſionary entertainments that had in them neither ſubſtance nor reality: which, by the way, is to ſuppoſe, that a hungry and fainting multitude were filled by an apparition, or ſtrengthned and refreſhed with ſhadows. He knew very well that there were ſo many witneſſes and actors, if I may call them ſuch, in theſe two miracles, that it was impoſſible to refute ſuch multitudes, who had doubtleſs ſufficiently ſpread the fame of them, and was therefore in this place forced to reſort to the other ſolution, that it was done

by magic. It was not enough to ſay that a miracle which appeared to ſo many thouſand eye-witneſſes was a forgery of Chriſt's diſciples, and therefore ſuppoſing them to be eye-witneſſes, he endeavours to ſhew how they might be deceived.

IV. The unconverted heathens, who were preſſed by the many authorities that confirmed our Saviour's miracles, as well as the unbelieving Jews, who had actually ſeen them, were driven to account for them after the ſame manner: for to work by magic in the heathen way of ſpeaking, was in the language of the Jews to caſt out devils by Beelzebub the prince of the devils. Our Saviour, who knew that unbelievers in all ages would put this perverſe interpretation on his miracles, has branded the malignity of thoſe men, who contrary to the dictates of their own hearts ſtarted ſuch an unreaſonable objection, as a blaſphemy againſt the Holy Ghoſt, and declared not only the guilt, but the puniſhment of ſo black a crime. At the ſame time he condeſcended to ſhew the vanity and emptineſs of this objection againſt his miracles, by repreſenting that they evidently tended to the deſtruction of thoſe powers, to whoſe aſſiſtance the enemies of his doctrine then aſcribed them. An argument, which, if duly weighed, renders the objection ſo very frivolous and groundleſs, that we may venture to call it even blaſphemy againſt common ſenſe.

Would magic endeavour to draw off the minds of men from the worſhip which was paid to ſtocks and ſtones, to give them an abhorrence of thoſe evil ſpirits who rejoiced in the moſt cruel ſacrifices, and in offerings of the greateſt impurity; and in ſhort to call upon mankind to exert their whole ſtrength in the love and adoration of that one Being, from whom they derived their exiſtence, and on whom only they were taught to depend every moment for the happineſs and continuance of it? was it the buſineſs of magic to humanize our natures with compaſſion, forgiveneſs, and all the inſtances of the moſt extenſive charity? would evil ſpirits contribute to make men ſober, chaſte, and temperate, and in a word to produce that reformation, which was wrought in the moral world by thoſe doctrines of our Saviour, that received their ſanction from his miracles? nor is it poſſible to imagine, that evil ſpirits would enter into a combination with our Saviour to cut off all their correſpondence and intercourſe with mankind, and to prevent any for the future from addicting themſelves to thoſe rites and ceremonies, which had done them ſo much honour. We ſee the early effect which Chriſtianity had on the minds of men in this particular, by that number of books, which were filled with the ſecrets of magic, and made a ſacrifice to Chriſtianity by the converts mentioned in the Acts of the apoſtles. We have

likewiſe an eminent inſtance of the inconſiſtency of our religion with magic, in the hiſtory of the famous Aquila. This perſon, who was a kinſman of the emperor Trajan, and likewiſe a man of great learning, notwithſtanding he had embraced Chriſtianity, could not be brought off from the ſtudies of magic, by the repeated admonitions of his fellow-Chriſtians: ſo that at length they expelled him their ſociety, as rather chuſing to loſe the reputation of ſo conſiderable a proſelyte, than communicate with one who dealt in ſuch dark and infernal practices. Beſides, we may obſerve, that all the favourers of magic were the moſt profeſt and bitter enemies to the chriſtian religion. Not to mention Simon Magus and many others, I ſhall only take notice of thoſe two great perſecutors of Chriſtianity, the emperors Adrian and Julian the apoſtate, both of them initiated in the myſteries of divination, and ſkilled in all the depths of magic. I ſhall only add, that evil ſpirits cannot be ſuppoſed to have concurred in the eſtabliſhment of a religion which triumphed over them, drove them out of the places they poſſeſt, and diveſted them of their influence on mankind; nor would I mention this particular, though it be unanimouſly reported by all the ancient Chriſtian authors: did it not appear from the authorities above cited, that it was a fact confeſt by the heathens themſelves.

V. We now ſee what a multitude of Pagan teſtimonies may be produced for all thoſe remarkable paſſages, which might have been expected from them: and indeed of ſeveral, that, I believe, do more than anſwer your expectation, as they were not ſubjects in their own nature ſo expoſed to publick notoriety. It cannot be expected they ſhould mention particulars, which were tranſacted amongſt the diſciples only, or among ſome few even of the diſciples themſelves; ſuch as the transfiguration, the agony in the garden, the appearance of Chriſt after his reſurrection, and others of the like nature. It was impoſſible for a heathen author to relate theſe things; becauſe if he had believed them, he would no longer have been a heathen, and by that means his teſtimony would not have been thought of ſo much validity. Beſides, his very report of facts ſo favourable to Chriſtianity would have prompted men to ſay that he was probably tainted with their doctrine. We have a parallel caſe in Hecataeus, a famous Greek hiſtorian, who had ſeveral paſſages in his book conformable to the hiſtory of the Jewiſh writers, which when quoted by Joſephus, as a confirmation of the Jewiſh hiſtory, when his heathen adverſaries could give no other anſwer to it, they would need ſuppoſe that Hecataeus was a Jew in his heart, though they had no other reaſon for it, but becauſe his hiſtory gave greater authority to the Jewiſh than the Egyptian records.

SECTION III.

I. Introduction to a ſecond [illegible] of Pagan Authors, who give teſtimony of our Saviour.
II. A paſſage concerning our Saviour, from a learned Athenian.
III. His converſion from Paganiſm to Chriſtianity makes his evidence ſtronger than if he had continued a Pagan.
IV. Of another Athenian philoſopher converted to Chriſtianity.
V. Why their converſion, inſtead of weakning, ſtrengthens their evidence in defence of Chriſtianity.
VI. Their belief in our Saviour's hiſtory founded at firſt upon the principles of hiſtorical faith.
VII. Their teſtimonies extended to all the particulars of our Saviour's hiſtory.
VIII. As related by the four Evangeliſts.

I. TO this liſt of heathen writers who make mention of our Saviour, or touch upon any particulars of his life, I ſhall add thoſe authors who were at firſt heathens, and afterwards converted to Chriſtianity; upon which account, as I ſhall here ſhew, their teſtimonies are to be looked upon as the more authentick. And in this liſt of evidences, I ſhall confine myſelf to ſuch learned Pagans as came over to Chriſtianity in the three firſt

centuries, becauſe thoſe were the times in which men had the beſt means of informing themſelves of the truth of our Saviour's hiſtory, and becauſe among the great number of Philoſophers who came in afterwards, under the reigns of Chriſtian emperors, there might be ſeveral who did it partly out of worldly motives.

II. Let us now ſuppoſe, that a learned heathen writer who lived within 60 years of our Saviour's crucifixion, after having ſhewn that falſe miracles were generally wrought in obſcurity, and before few or no witneſſes, ſpeaking of thoſe which were wrought by our Saviour, has the following paſſage. 'But 'his works were always ſeen, becauſe they 'were true, they were ſeen by thoſe who were 'healed, and by thoſe who were raiſed from 'the dead. Nay, theſe perſons who were thus 'healed, and raiſed, were ſeen not only at 'the time of their being healed, and raiſed, 'but long afterwards. Nay they were ſeen 'not only all the while our Saviour was upon 'earth, but ſurvived after his departure out 'of this world, nay ſome of them were living 'in our days.'

III. I dare ſay you would look upon this as a glorious atteſtation for the cauſe of Chriſtianity, had it come from the hand of a famous Athenian philoſopher. Theſe forementioned words however are actually the words of one who lived about ſixty years

after our Saviour's crucifixion, and was a famous philoſopher in Athens: but it will be ſaid, he was a convert to Chriſtianity. Now conſider this matter impartially, and ſee if his teſtimony is not much more valid for that reaſon. Had he continued a Pagan philoſopher, would not the world have ſaid that he was not ſincere in what he writ, or did not believe it; for, if ſo, would not they have told us he would have embraced Chriſtianity? this was indeed the caſe of this excellent man: he had ſo thoroughly examined the truth of our Saviour's hiſtory, and the excellency of that religion which he taught, and was ſo entirely convinced of both, that he became a proſelyte, and died a martyr.

IV. Ariſtides was an Athenian philoſopher, at the ſame time, famed for his learning and wiſdom, but converted to Chriſtianity. As it cannot be queſtioned that he peruſed and approved the apology of Quadratus, in which is the paſſage juſt now cited, he joined with him in an apology of his own, to the ſame emperor, on the ſame ſubject. This apology, tho' now loſt, was extant in the time of Ado Viennenſis, A. D. 870. and highly eſteemed by the moſt learned Athenians, as that author witneſſes. It muſt have contained great arguments for the truth of our Saviour's hiſtory, becauſe in it he aſſerted the divinity of our Saviour, which could not but engage him in the proof of his miracles.

V. I do allow that, generally ſpeaking, a man is not ſo acceptable and unqueſtioned an evidence in facts, which make for the advancement of his own party. But we muſt conſider that, in the caſe before us, the perſons, to whom we appeal, were of an oppoſite party, till they were perſuaded of the truth of thoſe very facts, which they report. They bear evidence to a hiſtory in defence of Chriſtianity, the truth of which hiſtory was their motive to embrace Chriſtianity. They atteſt facts which they had heard while they were yet heathens, and had they not found reaſon to believe them, they would ſtill have continued heathens, and have made no mention of them in their writings.

VI. When a man is born under Chriſtian parents, and trained up in the profeſſion of that religion from a child, he generally guides himſelf by the rules of Chriſtian Faith in believing what is delivered by the Evangeliſts; but the learned Pagans of antiquity, before they became Chriſtians, were only guided by the common rules of hiſtorical Faith: that is, they examined the nature of the evidence which was to be met with in common fame, tradition, and the writings of thoſe perſons who related them, together with the number, concurrence, veracity, and private characters of thoſe perſons; and being convinced upon all accounts that they had the ſame reaſon to believe the hiſtory of our Saviour, as that of

any other perſon to which they themſelves were not actually eye-witneſſes, they were bound by all the rules of hiſtorical faith, and of right reaſon, to give credit to this hiſtory. This they did accordingly, and in conſequence of it publiſhed the ſame truths themſelves, ſuffered many afflictions, and very often death itſelf, in the aſſertion of them. When I ſay, that an hiſtorical belief of the acts of our Saviour induced theſe learned Pagans to embrace this doctrine, I do not deny that there were many other motives which conduced to it, as the excellency of his precepts, the fulfilling of prophecies, the miracles of his diſciples, the irreproachable lives and magnanimous ſufferings of their followers, with other conſiderations of the ſame nature: but whatever other collateral arguments wrought more or leſs with philoſophers of that age, it is certain that a belief in the hiſtory of our Saviour was one motive with every new convert, and that upon which all others turned, as being the very baſis and foundation of Chriſtianity.

VII. To this I muſt further add, that as we have already ſeen many particular facts which are recorded in holy writ, atteſted by particular Pagan authors: the teſtimony of thoſe I am now going to produce, extends to the whole hiſtory of our Saviour, and to that continued ſeries of actions, which are related of him and his diſciples in the books of the New Teſtament.

VIII. This evidently appears from their quotations out of the evangeliſts, for the confirmation of any doctrine or account of our bleſſed Saviour. Nay a learned man of our nation, who examined the writings of the moſt ancient fathers in another view, refers to ſeveral paſſages in Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clemens of Alexandria, Origen, and Cyprian, by which he plainly ſhows that each of theſe early writers aſcribe to the four evangeliſts by name their reſpective hiſtories; ſo that there is not the leaſt room for doubting of their belief in the hiſtory of our Saviour, as recorded in the goſpels. I ſhall only add, that three of the five fathers here mentioned, and probably four, were Pagans converted to Chriſtianity, as they were all of them very inquiſitive and deep in the knowledge of heathen learning and philoſophy.

SECTION IV.

I. Character of the times in which the Chriſtian religion was propagated:
II. And of many who embraced it.
III. Three eminent and early inſtances.
IV. Multitudes of learned men who came over to it.
V. Belief in our Saviour's hiſtory, the firſt motive to their converſion.

VI. The names of ſeveral Pagan philoſophers, who were Chriſtian converts.

I. IT happened very providentially to the honour of the Chriſtian religion, that it did not take its riſe in the dark illiterate ages of the world, but at a time when arts and ſciences were at their height, and when there were men who made it the buſineſs of their lives to ſearch after truth, and ſift the ſeveral opinions of philoſophers and wiſe men, concerning the duty, the end, and chief happineſs of reaſonable creatures.

II. Several of theſe therefore, when they had informed themſelves of our Saviour's hiſtory, and examined with unprejudiced minds the doctrines and manners of his diſciples and followers, were ſo ſtruck and convinced, that they profeſſed themſelves of that ſect; notwithſtanding, by this profeſſion in that juncture of time, they bid farewel to all the pleaſures of this life, renounced all the views of ambition, ingaged in an uninterrupted courſe of ſeverities, and expoſed themſelves to publick hatred and contempt, to ſufferings of all kinds, and to death itſelf.

III. Of this ſort we may reckon thoſe three early converts to Chriſtianity, who each of them was a member of a ſenate famous for its wiſdom and learning. Joſeph the Arimathean was of the Jewiſh Sanhedrim, Dionyſius of the Athenian Areopagus, and Flavius

Clemens, of the Roman ſenate; nay at the time of his death conſul of Rome. Theſe three were ſo thoroughly ſatisfied of the truth of the Chriſtian religion, that the firſt of them, according to all the reports of antiquity, died a martyr for it; as did the ſecond, unleſs we diſbelieve Ariſtides, his fellow-citizen and contemporary; and the third, as we are informed both by Roman and Chriſtian authors.

IV. Among thoſe innumerable multitudes, who in moſt of the known nations of the world came over to Chriſtianity at its firſt appearance, we may be ſure there were great numbers of wiſe and learned men, beſides thoſe whoſe names are in the Chriſtian records, who without doubt took care to examine the truth of our Saviour's hiſtory, before they would leave the religion of their country and of their forefathers, for the ſake of one that would not only cut them off from the allurements of this world, but ſubject them to every thing terrible or diſagreeable in it. Tertullian tells the Roman governors, that their corporations, councils, armies, tribes, companies, the palace, ſenate, and courts of judicature were filled with Chriſtians; as Arnobius aſſerts, that men of the fineſt parts and learning, orators, grammarians, rhetoricians, lawyers, phyſicians, philoſophers, deſpiſing the ſentiments they had been once fond of, took up their reſt in the Chriſtian religion.

V. Who can imagine that men of this character did not thoroughly inform themſelves of the hiſtory of that perſon, whoſe doctrines they embraced? for however conſonant to reaſon his precepts appeared, how good ſoever were the effects which they produced in the world, nothing could have tempted men to acknowledge him as their God and Saviour, but their being firmly perſuaded of the miracles he wrought, and the many atteſtations of his divine miſſion, which were to be met with in the hiſtory of his life. This was the ground-work of the Chriſtian religion, and, if this failed, the whole ſuperſtructure ſunk with it. This point therefore, of the truth of our Saviour's hiſtory, as recorded by the evangeliſts, is every where taken for granted in the writings of thoſe, who from Pagan philoſophers became Chriſtian authors, and who, by reaſon of their converſion, are to be looked upon as of the ſtrongeſt collateral teſtimony for the truth of what is delivered concerning our Saviour.

VI. Beſides innumerable authors that are loſt, we have the undoubted names, works or fragments of ſeveral Pagan philoſophers, which ſhew them to have been as learned as any unconverted heathen authors of the age in which they lived. If we look into the greateſt nurſeries of learning in thoſe ages of the world, we find in Athens, Dionyſius, Quadratus, Ariſtides, Athenagoras; and in Alex-

andria, Dionyſius, Clemens, Ammonius, Arnobius, and Anatolius, to whom we may add Origen; for though his father was a Chriſtian martyr, he became, without all controverſy, the moſt learned and able philoſopher of his age, by his education at Alexandria, in that famous ſeminary of arts and ſciences.

SECTION V.

I. The learned Pagans had means and opportunities of informing themſelves of the truth of our Saviour's hiſtory;
II. From the proceedings,
III. The characters, ſufferings,
IV. And miracles of the perſons who publiſhed it.
V. How theſe firſt apoſtles perpetuated their tradition, by ordaining perſons to ſucceed them.
VI. How their ſucceſſors in the three firſt centuries preſerved their tradition.
VII. That five generations might derive this tradition from Chriſt, to the end of the third century.
VIII. Four eminent Chriſtians that delivered it down ſucceſſively to the year of our Lord 254.
IX. The faith of the four above-mentioned perſons, the ſame with that of the churches of the eaſt, of the weſt, and of Egypt.

X. Another perſon added to them, who brings us to the year 343, and that many other liſts might be added in as direct and ſhort a ſucceſſion.

XI. Why the tradition of the three firſt centuries, more authentick than that of any other age, proved from the converſation of the primitive Chriſtians.

XII. From the manner of initiating men into their religion.

XIII. From the correſpondence between the churches.

XIV. From the long lives of ſeveral of Chriſt's diſciples, of which two inſtances.

I. IT now therefore only remains to conſider, whether theſe learned men had means and opportunities of informing themſelves of the truth of our Saviour's hiſtory; for unleſs this point can be made out, their teſtimonies will appear invalid, and their enquiries ineffectual.

II. As to this point, we muſt conſider, that many thouſands had ſeen the tranſactions of our Saviour in Judaea, and that many hundred thouſands had received an account of them from the mouths of thoſe who were actually eye-witneſſes. I ſhall only mention among theſe eye-witneſſes the twelve apoſtles, to whom we muſt add St. Paul, who had a particular call to this high office, though many other diſciples and followers of Chriſt had

alſo their ſhare in the publiſhing this wonderful hiſtory. We learn from the ancient records of Chriſtianity, that many of the apoſtles and diſciples made it the expreſs buſineſs of their lives, travelled into the remoteſt parts of the world, and in all places gathered multitudes about them, to acquaint them with the hiſtory and doctrines of their crucified Maſter. And indeed, were all Chriſtian records of theſe proceedings entirely loſt, as many have been, the effect plainly evinces the truth of them; for how elſe during the apoſtles lives, could Chriſtianity have ſpread itſelf with ſuch an amazing progreſs through the ſeveral nations of the Roman empire? how could it fly like lightning, and carry conviction with it, from one end of the earth to the other?

III. Heathens therefore of every age, ſex, and quality, born in the moſt different climates, and bred up under the moſt different inſtitutions, when they ſaw men of plain ſenſe, without the help of learning, armed with patience and courage, inſtead of wealth, pomp, or power, expreſſing in their lives thoſe excellent doctrines of morality, which they taught as delivered to them from our Saviour, averring that they had ſeen his miracles during his life, and converſed with him after his death; when, I ſay, they ſaw no ſuſpicion of falſhood, treachery, or worldly intereſt, in their behaviour and converſation, and that they ſub-

mitted to the moſt ignominious and cruel deaths, rather than retract their teſtimony, or even be ſilent in matters which they were to publiſh by their Saviour's eſpecial command, there was no reaſon to doubt of the veracity of thoſe facts which they related, or of the divine miſſion in which they were employed.

IV. But even theſe motives to faith in our Saviour would not have been ſufficient to have brought about in ſo few years ſuch an incredible number of converſions, had not the apoſtles been able to exhibit ſtill greater proofs of the truths which they taught. A few perſons of an odious and deſpiſed country could not have filled the world with believers, had they not ſhown undoubted credentials from the divine perſon who ſent them on ſuch a meſſage. Accordingly we are aſſured, that they were inveſted with the power of working miracles, which was the moſt ſhort and the moſt convincing argument that could be produced, and the only one that was adapted to the reaſon of all mankind, to the capacities of the wiſe and ignorant, and could overcome every cavil and every prejudice. Who would not believe that our Saviour healed the ſick, and raiſed the dead, when it was publiſhed by thoſe who themſelves often did the ſame miracles, in their preſence, and in his name! could any reaſonable perſon imagine, that God Almighty would arm men with ſuch powers to authorize a lye, and eſtabliſh a re-

ligion in the world which was diſpleaſing to him, or that evil ſpirits would lend them ſuch an effectual aſſiſtance to beat down vice and idolatry?

V. When the apoſtles had formed many aſſemblies in ſeveral parts of the Pagan world, who gave credit to the glad tidings of the goſpel, that, upon their departure, the memory of what they had related might not periſh, they appointed out of theſe new converts, men of the beſt ſenſe, and of the moſt unblemiſhed lives, to preſide over theſe ſeveral aſſemblies, and to inculcate without ceaſing what they had heard from the mouths of theſe eye-witneſſes.

VI. Upon the death of any of thoſe ſubſtitutes to the apoſtles and diſciples of Chriſt, his place was filled up with ſome other perſon of eminence for his piety and learning, and generally a member of the ſame church, who after his deceaſe was followed by another in the ſame manner, by which means the ſucceſſion was continued in an uninterrupted line. Irenaeus informs us, that every church preſerved a catalogue of its biſhops in the order that they ſucceeded one another, and (for an example) produces the catalogue of thoſe who governed the church of Rome in that character, which contains eight or nine perſons, though but at a very ſmall remove from the times of the apoſtles.

Indeed the liſts of biſhops, which are come

down to us in other churches, are generally filled with greater numbers than one would expect. But the ſucceſſion was quick in the three firſt centuries, becauſe the biſhop very often ended in the martyr: for when a perſecution aroſe in any place, the firſt fury of it fell upon this order of holy men, who abundantly teſtified by their deaths and ſufferings that they did not undertake theſe offices out of any temporal views, that they were ſincere and ſatisfied in the belief of what they taught, and that they firmly adhered to what they had received from the apoſtles, as laying down their lives in the ſame hope, and upon the ſame principles. None can be ſuppoſed ſo utterly regardleſs of their own happineſs as to expire in torment, and hazard their eternity, to ſupport any fables and inventions of their own, or any forgeries of their predeceſſors who had preſided in the ſame church,and which might have been eaſily detected by the tradition of that particular church, as well as by the concurring teſtimony of others. To this purpoſe, I think it is very remarkable, that there was not a ſingle martyr among thoſe many hereticks, who diſagreed with the apoſtolical church, and introduced ſeveral wild and abſurd notions into the doctrines of Chriſtianity. They durſt not ſtake their preſent and future happineſs on their own chimerical imaginations, and did not only ſhun perſecution, but affirmed that

it was unneceſſary for their followers to bear their religion through ſuch fiery tryals.

VII. We may fairly reckon, that this firſt age of apoſtles and diſciples, with that ſecond generation of many who were their immediate converts, extended itſelf to the middle of the ſecond century, and that ſeveral of the third generation from theſe laſt mentioned, which was but the fifth from Chriſt, continued to the end of the third century. Did we know the ages and numbers of the members in every particular church, which was planted by the apoſtles, I doubt not but in moſt of them there might be found five perſons who in a continued ſeries would reach through theſe three centuries of years, that is, till the 265th from the death of our Saviour.

VIII. Among the accounts of thoſe very few out of innumerable multitudes, who had embraced Chriſtianity, I ſhall ſingle out four perſons eminent for their lives, their writings and their ſufferings, that were ſucceſſively contemporaries, and bring us down as far as to the year of our Lord 254. St. John, who was the beloved diſciple, and converſed the moſt intimately with our Saviour, lived till Anno Dom. 100. Polycarp, who was the diſciple of St. John, and had converſed with others of the apoſtles and diſciples of our Lord, lived till Anno Dom. 167, though his life was ſhortened by martyrdom. Irenaeus, who was the diſciple of Polycarp, and had con-

verſed with many of the immediate diſciples of the apoſtles, lived, at the loweſt computation of his age, till the year 202, when he was likewiſe cut off by martyrdom; in which year the great Origen was appointed regent of the catechetick ſchool in Alexandria, and as he was the miracle of that age, for induſtry, learning, and philoſophy, he was looked upon as the champion of Chriſtianity, till the year 254, when, if he did not ſuffer martyrdom, as ſome think he did, he was certainly actuated by the ſpirit of it, as appears in the whole courſe of his life and writings; nay, he had often been put to the torture, and had undergone tryals worſe than death. As he converſed with the moſt eminent Chriſtians of his time in Egypt, and in the eaſt, brought over multitudes both from hereſy and heatheniſm, and left behind him ſeveral diſciples of great fame and learning, there is no queſtion but there were conſiderable numbers of thoſe who knew him, and had been his hearers, ſcholars, or proſelytes, that lived till the end of the third century, and to the reign of Conſtantine the great.

IX. It is evident to thoſe, who read the lives and writings of Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Origen, that theſe three fathers believed the accounts which are given of our Saviour in the four evangeliſts, and had undoubted arguments that not only St. John, but many others of our Saviour's diſciples, publiſhed the

ſame accounts of him. To which we muſt ſubjoin this further remark, that what was believed by theſe fathers on this ſubject, was likewiſe the belief of the main body of Chriſtians in thoſe ſucceſſive ages when they flouriſhed; ſince Polycarp cannot but be looked upon, if we conſider the reſpect that was paid him, as the repreſentative of the eaſtern churches in this particular, Irenaeus of the weſtern upon the ſame account, and Origen, of thoſe eſtabliſhed in Egypt.

X. To theſe I might add Paul the famous hermite, who retired from the Decian perſecution five or ſix years before Origen's death, and lived till the year 343. I have only diſcovered one of thoſe channels by which the hiſtory of our Saviour might be conveyed pure and unadulterated, through thoſe ſeveral ages that produced thoſe Pagan philoſophers, whoſe teſtimonies I make uſe of for the truth of our Saviour's hiſtory. Some or other of theſe philoſophers came into the Chriſtian faith during its infancy, in the ſeveral periods of theſe three firſt centuries, when they had ſuch means of informing themſelves in all the particulars of our Saviour's hiſtory. I muſt further add, that though I have here only choſen this ſingle link of martyrs, I might find out others among thoſe names which are ſtill extant, that delivered down this account of our Saviour in a ſucceſſive tradition, till the whole Roman empire

became Chriſtian; as there is no queſtion but numberleſs ſeries of witneſſes might follow one another in the ſame order, and in as ſhort a chain, and that perhaps in every ſingle church, had the names and ages of the moſt eminent primitive Chriſtians been tranſmitted to us with the like certainty.

XI. But to give this conſideration more force, we muſt take notice, that the tradition of the firſt ages of Chriſtianity had ſeveral circumſtances peculiar to it, which made it more authentick than any other tradition in any other age of the world. The Chriſtians, who carried their religion through ſo many general and particular perſecutions, were inceſſantly comforting and ſupporting one another, with the example and hiſtory of our Saviour and his apoſtles. It was the ſubject not only of their ſolemn aſſemblies, but of their private viſits and converſations. 'Our virgins,' ſays Tatian, who lived in the ſecond century, 'diſcourſe over their diſtaffs on divine ſub-'jects.' Indeed, when religion was woven into the civil government, and flouriſhed under the protection of the emperors, men's thoughts and diſcourſes were, as they are now, full of ſecular affairs; but in the three firſt centuries of Chriſtianity, men, who embraced this religion, had given up all their intereſts in this world, and lived in a perpetual preparation for the next, as not knowing how ſoon they might be called to it: ſo that they had

little elſe to talk of but the life and doctrines of that divine perſon, which was their hope, their encouragement, and their glory. We cannot therefore imagine, that there was a ſingle perſon arrived at any degree of age or conſideration, who had not heard and repeated above a thouſand times in his life, all the particulars of our Saviour's birth, life, death, reſurrection, and aſcenſion.

XII. Eſpecially if we conſider, that they could not then be received as Chriſtians, till they had undergone ſeveral examinations. Perſons of riper years, who flocked daily into the church during the three firſt centuries, were obliged to paſs through many repeated inſtructions, and give a ſtrict account of their proficiency, before they were admitted to baptiſm. And as for thoſe who were born of Chriſtian parents, and had been baptiſed in their infancy, they were with the like care prepared and diſciplined for confirmation, which they could not arrive at, till they were found upon examination to have made a ſufficient progreſs in the knowledge of Chriſtianity.

XIII. We muſt further obſerve, that there was not only in thoſe times this religious converſation among private Chriſtians, but a conſtant correſpondence between the churches that were eſtabliſhed by the apoſtles or their ſucceſſors, in the ſeveral parts of the world. If any new doctrine was ſtarted, or

any fact reported of our Saviour, a ſtrict enquiry was made among the churches, eſpecially thoſe planted by the apoſtles themſelves, whether they had received any ſuch doctrine or account of our Saviour, from the mouths of the apoſtles, or the tradition of thoſe Chriſtians, who had preceded the preſent members of the churches which were thus conſulted. By this means, when any novelty was publiſhed, it was immediately detected and cenſured.

XIV. St. John, who lived ſo many years after our Saviour, was appealed to in theſe emergencies as the living oracle of the church; and as his oral teſtimony laſted the firſt century, many have obſerved that by a particular providence of God, ſeveral of our Saviour's diſciples, and of the early converts of his religion, lived to a very great age, that they might perſonally convey the truth of the goſpel to thoſe times, which were very remote from the firſt publication of it. Of theſe, beſides St. John, we have a remarkable inſtance in Simeon, who was one of the ſeventy ſent forth by our Saviour to publiſh the goſpel before his crucifixion, and a near kinſman of the Lord. This venerable perſon, who had probably heard with his own ears our Saviour's prophecy of the deſtruction of Jeruſalem, preſided over the church eſtabliſhed in that city, during the time of its memorable ſiege, and drew his congregation out

of thoſe dreadful and unparallel'd calamities which befel his countrymen, by following the advice our Saviour had given, when they ſhould ſee Jeruſalem encompaſſed with armies, and the Roman ſtandards, or abomination of deſolation, ſet up. He lived till the year of our Lord 107, when he was martyred under the emperor Trajan.

SECTION VI.

I. The tradition of the apoſtles ſecured by other excellent inſtitutions;

II. But chiefly by the writings of the evangeliſts.

III. The diligence of the diſciples and firſt Chriſtian converts, to ſend abroad theſe writings.

IV. That the written account of our Saviour was the ſame with that delivered by tradition;

V. Proved from the reception of the goſpel by thoſe churches which were eſtabliſhed before it was written;

VI. From the uniformity of what was believed in the ſeveral churches;

VII. From a remarkable paſſage in Irenaeus.

VIII. Records which are now loſt, of uſe to the three firſt centuries, for confirming the hiſtory of our Saviour.

IX. Inſtances of ſuch records,

I. THUS far we ſee how the learned Pagans might apprize themſelves from oral information of the particulars of our Saviour's hiſtory. They could hear, in every church planted in every diſtant part of the earth, the account which was there received and preſerved among them, of the hiſtory of our Saviour. They could learn the names and characters of thoſe firſt miſſionaries that brought to them theſe accounts, and the miracles by which God Almighty atteſted their reports. But the apoſtles and diſciples of Chriſt, to preſerve the hiſtory of his life, and to ſecure their accounts of him from error and oblivion, did not only ſet aſide certain perſons for that purpoſe, as has been already ſhown, but appropriated certain days to the commemoration of thoſe facts which they had related concerning him. The firſt day of the week was in all its returns a perpetual memorial of his reſurrection, as the devotional exerciſes adapted to Friday and Saturday, were to denote to all ages that he was crucified on the one of thoſe days, and that he reſted in the grave on the other. You may apply the ſame remark to ſeveral of the annual feſtivals inſtituted by the apoſtles themſelves, or at furtheſt by their immediate ſucceſſors, in memory of the moſt important particulars in our Saviour's hiſtory; to which we muſt add the ſacraments inſtituted by our Lord himſelf, and many of thoſe rites and ceremonies which ob-

tained in the moſt early times of the church. Theſe are to be regarded as ſtanding marks of ſuch facts as were delivered by thoſe, who were eye-witneſſes to them, and which were contrived with great wiſdom to laſt till time ſhould be no more. Theſe, without any other means, might have, in ſome meaſure, conveyed to poſterity, the memory of ſeveral tranſactions in the hiſtory of our Saviour, as they were related by his diſciples. At leaſt, the reaſon of theſe inſtitutions, though they might be forgotten, and obſcured by a long courſe of years, could not but be very well known by thoſe who lived in the three firſt centuries, and a means of informing the inquiſitive Pagans in the truth of our Saviour's hiſtory, that being the view in which I am to conſider them.

II. But leſt ſuch a tradition, though guarded by ſo many expedients, ſhould wear out by the length of time, the four evangeliſts within about fifty, or, as Theodoret affirms, thirty years, after our Saviour's death, while the memory of his actions was freſh among them, conſigned to writing that hiſtory, which for ſome years had been publiſhed only by the mouth of the apoſtles and diſciples. The further conſideration of theſe holy penmen will fall under another part of this diſcourſe.

III. It will be ſufficient to obſerve here, that in the age which ſucceeded the apoſtles, many of their immediate diſciples ſent or

carried in perſon the books of the four evangeliſts, which had been written by apoſtles, or at leaſt approved by them, to moſt of the churches which they had planted in the different parts of the world. This was done with ſo much diligence, that when Pantaenus, a man of great learning and piety, had travelled into India for the propagation of Chriſtianity, about the year of our Lord 200, he found among that remote people the goſpel of St. Matthew, which upon his return from that country he brought with him to Alexandria. This goſpel is generally ſuppoſed to have been left in thoſe parts by St. Bartholomew the apoſtle of the Indies, who probably carried it with him before the writings of the three other evangeliſts were publiſhed.

IV. That the hiſtory of our Saviour, as recorded by the evangeliſts, was the ſame with that which had been before delivered by the apoſtles and diſciples, will further appear in the proſecution of this diſcourſe, and may be gathered from the following conſiderations.

V. Had theſe writings differed from the ſermons of the firſt planters of Chriſtianity, either in hiſtory or doctrine, there is no queſtion but they would have been rejected by thoſe churches which they had already formed. But ſo conſiſtent and uniform was the relation of the apoſtles, that theſe hiſtories appeared to be nothing elſe but their tradition

and oral atteſtations made fixt and permanent. Thus was the fame of our Saviour, which in ſo few years had gone through the whole earth, confirmed and perpetuated by ſuch records, as would preſerve the traditionary account of him to after-ages; and rectifie it, if at any time, by paſſing through ſeveral generations, it might drop any part that was material, or contract any thing that was falſe or fictitious.

VI. Accordingly we find the ſame Jeſus Chriſt, who was born of a virgin, who had wrought many miracles in Paleſtine, who was crucified, roſe again, and aſcended into heaven; I ſay, the ſame Jeſus Chriſt had been preached, and was worſhipped, in Germany, France, Spain, and Great-Britain, in Parthia, Media, Meſopotamia, Armenia, Phrygia, Aſia and Pamphylia, in Italy, Egypt, Afric, and beyond Cyrene, India and Perſia, and, in ſhort, in all the iſlands and provinces that are viſited by the riſing or ſetting ſun. The ſame account of our Saviour's life and doctrine was delivered by thouſands of preachers, and believed in thouſands of places, who all, as faſt as it could be conveyed to them, received the ſame account in writing from the four evangeliſts.

VII. Irenaeus to this purpoſe very aptly remarks, that thoſe barbarous nations, who in his time were not poſſeſt of the written goſpels, and had only learned the hiſtory of our

Saviour from thoſe who had converted them to Chriſtianity before the goſpels were written, had among them the ſame accounts of our Saviour, which are to be met with in the four evangeliſts. An unconteſtable proof of the harmony and concurrence between the holy ſcripture and the tradition of the churches in thoſe early times of Chriſtianity.

VIII. Thus we ſee what opportunities the learned and inquiſitive heathens had of informing themſelves of the truth of our Saviour's hiſtory, during the three firſt centuries, eſpecially as they lay nearer one than another to the fountain-head: beſide which there were many uncontroverted traditions, records of Chriſtianity, and particular hiſtories, that then threw light into theſe matters, but are now entirely loſt, by which, at that time, any appearance of contradiction, or ſeeming difficulties, in the hiſtory of the evangeliſts, were fully cleared up and explained: though we meet with fewer appearances of this nature in the hiſtory of our Saviour, as related by the four evangeliſts, than in the accounts of any other perſon, publiſhed by ſuch a number of different hiſtorians who lived at ſo great a diſtance from the preſent age.

IX. Among thoſe records which are loſt, and were of great uſe to the primitive Chriſtians, is the letter to Tiberius, which I have already mentioned; that of Marcus Aurelius, which I ſhall take notice of hereafter; the

writings of Hegeſippus, who had drawn down the hiſtory of Chriſtianity to his own time, which was not beyond the middle of the ſecond century; the genuine Sibylline oracles, which in the firſt ages of the church were eaſily diſtinguiſhed from the ſpurious; the records preſerved in particular churches, with many other of the ſame nature.

SECTION VII.

I. The ſight of miracles in thoſe ages a further confirmation of Pagan philoſophers in the Chriſtian faith.
II. The credibility of ſuch miracles.
III. A particular inſtance.
IV. Martyrdom, why conſidered as a ſtanding miracle.
V. Primitive Chriſtians thought many of the martyrs were ſupported by a miraculous power:
VI. Proved from the nature of their ſufferings.
VII. How martyrs further induced the Pagans to embrace Chriſtianity.

I. THERE were other means, which I find had a great influence on the learned of the three firſt centuries, to create and confirm in them the belief of our bleſſed Saviour's hiſtory, which ought not to be paſ-

ſed over in ſilence. The firſt was, the opportunity they enjoyed of examining thoſe miracles, which were on ſeveral occaſions performed by Chriſtians, and appeared in the church more or leſs, during theſe firſt ages of Chriſtianity. Theſe had great weight with the men I am now ſpeaking of, who, from learned Pagans, became fathers of the church; for they frequently boaſt of them in their writings, as atteſtations given by God himſelf to the truth of their religion.

II. At the ſame time, that theſe learned men declare how diſingenuous, baſe and wicked it would be, how much beneath the dignity of philoſophy, and contrary to the precepts of Chriſtianity, to utter falſhoods or forgeries in the ſupport of a cauſe, though never ſo juſt in itſelf, they confidently aſſert this miraculous power, which then ſubſiſted in the church, nay tell us that they themſelves had been eye-witneſſes of it at ſeveral times, and in ſeveral inſtances; nay appeal to the Heathens themſelves for the truth of ſeveral facts they relate, nay challenge them to be preſent at their aſſemblies, and ſatisfie themſelves, if they doubt of it; nay we find that Pagan authors have in ſome inſtances confeſſed this miraculous power.

III. The letter of Marcus Aurelius, whoſe army was preſerved by a refreſhing ſhower, at the ſame time that his enemies were diſcomfited by a ſtorm of lightning, and which

the heathen hiſtorians themſelves allow to have been ſupernatural and the effect of magic: I ſay, this letter, which aſcribed this unexpected aſſiſtance to the prayers of the Chriſtians, who then ſerved in the army, would have been thought an unqueſtionable teſtimony of the miraculous power I am ſpeaking of, had it been ſtill preſerved. It is ſufficient for me in this place to take notice, that this was one of thoſe miracles which had its influence on the learned converts, becauſe it is related by Tertullian, and the very letter appealed to. When theſe learned men ſaw ſickneſs and frenzy cured, the dead raiſed, the oracles put to ſilence, the Daemons and evil ſpirits forced to confeſs themſelves no Gods, by perſons who only made uſe of prayer and adjurations in the name of their crucified Saviour; how could they doubt of their Saviour's power on the like occaſions, as repreſented to them by the traditions of the church, and the writings of the evangeliſts?

IV. Under this head, I cannot omit that which appears to me a ſtanding miracle in the three firſt centuries, I mean that amazing and ſupernatural courage or patience, which was ſhewn by innumerable multitudes of martyrs, in thoſe ſlow and painful torments that were inflicted on them. I cannot conceive a man placed in the burning iron chair at Lyons, amid the inſults and mockeries of a crowded amphitheatre, and ſtill keeping his ſeat; or

ſtretched upon a grate of iron, over coals of fire, and breathing out his ſoul among the exquiſite ſufferings of ſuch a tedious execution, rather than renounce his religion, or blaſpheme his Saviour. Such tryals ſeem to me above the ſtrength of human nature, and able to over-bear duty, reaſon, faith, conviction, nay, and the moſt abſolute certainty of a future ſtate. Humanity, unaſſiſted in an extraordinary manner, muſt have ſhaken off the preſent preſſure, and have delivered itſelf out of ſuch a dreadful diſtreſs, by any means that could have been ſuggeſted to it. We can eaſily imagine, that many perſons, in ſo good a cauſe, might have laid down their lives at the gibbet, the ſtake, or the block: but to expire leiſurely among the moſt exquiſite tortures, when they might come out of them, even by a mental reſervation, or an hypocriſy which was not without a poſſibility of being followed by repentance and forgiveneſs, has ſomething in it, ſo far beyond the force and natural ſtrength of mortals, that one cannot but think there was ſome miraculous power to ſupport the ſufferer.

V. We find the church of Smyrna, in that admirable letter which gives an account of the death of Polycarp their beloved biſhop, mentioning the cruel torments of other early martyrs for Chriſtianity, are of opinion, that our Saviour ſtood by them in a viſion, and perſonally converſed with them, to give them

ſtrength and comfort during the bitterneſs of their long-continued agonies; and we have the ſtory of a young man, who, having ſuffered many tortures, eſcaped with life, and told his fellow-Chriſtians, that the pain of them had been rendred tolerable, by the preſence of an angel who ſtood by him, and wiped off the tears and ſweat, which ran down his face whilſt he lay under his ſufferings. We are aſſured at leaſt that the firſt martyr for Chriſtianity was encouraged in his laſt moments, by a viſion of that divine perſon, for whom he ſuffered, and into whoſe preſence he was then haſtening.

VI. Let any man calmly lay his hand upon his heart, and after reading theſe terrible conflicts in which the ancient martyrs and confeſſors were engaged, when they paſſed through ſuch new inventions and varieties of pain, as tired their tormentors; and aſk himſelf, however zealous and ſincere he is in his religion, whether under ſuch acute and lingring tortures he could ſtill have held faſt his integrity, and have profeſſed his faith to the laſt, without a ſupernatural aſſiſtance of ſome kind or other. For my part, when I conſider that it was not an unaccountable obſtinacy in a ſingle man, or in any particular ſett of men, in ſome extraordinary juncture; but that there were multitudes of each ſex, of every age, of different countries and conditions, who for near 300 years together made

this glorious confeſſion of their faith, in the midſt of tortures, and in the hour of death: I muſt conclude, that they were either of another make than men are at preſent, or that they had ſuch miraculous ſupports as were peculiar to thoſe times of Chriſtianity, when without them perhaps the very name of it might have been extinguiſhed.

VII. It is certain, that the deaths and ſufferings of the primitive Chriſtians had a great ſhare in the converſion of thoſe learned Pagans, who lived in the ages of perſecution, which with ſome intervals and abatements laſted near 300 years after our Saviour. Juſtin Martyr, Tertullian, Lactantius, Arnobius, and others, tell us, that this firſt of all alarmed their curioſity, rouſed their attention, and made them ſeriouſly inquiſitive into the nature of that religion, which could endue the mind with ſo much ſtrength, and overcome the fear of death, nay raiſe an earneſt deſire of it, though it appeared in all its terrors. This they found had not been effected by all the doctrines of thoſe philoſophers, whom they had thoroughly ſtudied, and who had been labouring at this great point. The ſight of thoſe dying and tormented martyrs engaged them to ſearch into the hiſtory and doctrines of him for whom they ſuffered. The more they ſearched, the more they were convinced; till their conviction grew ſo ſtrong, that they themſelves embraced the ſame truths,

and either actually laid down their lives, or were always in a readineſs to do it, rather than depart from them.

SECTION VIII.

I. The completion of our Saviour's prophecies confirmed Pagans in their belief of the goſpel.
II. Origen's obſervation on that of his diſciples being brought before kings and governours;
III. On their being perſecuted for their religion;
IV. On their preaching the goſpel to all nations;
V. On the deſtruction of Jeruſalem, and ruine of the Jewiſh oeconomy.
VI. Theſe arguments ſtrengthened by what has happened ſince Origen's time.

I. THE ſecond of thoſe extraordinary means, of great uſe to the learned and inquiſitive Pagans of the three firſt centuries, for evincing the truth of the hiſtory of our Saviour, was the completion of ſuch prophecies as are recorded of him in the evangeliſts. They could not indeed form any arguments from what he foretold, and was fulfilled during his life, becauſe both the prophecy and the completion were over before they were publiſhed by the evangeliſts;

though, as Origen obſerves, what end could there be in forging ſome of theſe predictions, as that of St. Peter's denying his maſter, and all his diſciples forſaking him in the greateſt extremity, which reflects ſo much ſhame on the great apoſtle, and on all his companions? nothing but a ſtrict adherence to truth, and to matters of fact, could have prompted the evangeliſts to relate a circumſtance ſo diſadvantageous to their own reputation; as that father has well obſerved.

II. But to purſue his reflections on this ſubject. There are predictions of our Saviour recorded by the evangeliſts, which were not completed till after their deaths, and had no likelihood of being ſo, when they were pronounced by our bleſſed Saviour. Such was that wonderful notice he gave them, that they ſhould be brought before governours and kings for his ſake, for a teſtimony againſt them and the Gentiles, Matt. x. 28. with the other like prophecies, by which he foretold that his diſciples were to be perſecuted. Is there any other doctrine in the world, ſays this father, whoſe followers are puniſhed? can the enemies of Chriſt ſay, that he knew his opinions were falſe and impious, and that therefore he might well conjecture and foretell what would be the treatment of thoſe perſons who ſhould embrace them? Suppoſing his doctrines were really ſuch, why ſhould this be the conſequence? what likelihood that

men ſhould be brought before kings and governors for opinions and tenets of any kind, when this never happened even to the Epicureans, who abſolutely denied a Providence; nor to the Peripateticks themſelves, who laughed at the prayers and ſacrifices which were made to the Divinity? are there any but the Chriſtians who, according to this prediction of our Saviour, being brought before kings and governors for his ſake, are preſſed to their lateſt gaſp of breath, by their reſpective judges, to renounce Chriſtianity, and to procure their liberty and reſt, by offering the ſame ſacrifices, and taking the ſame oaths that others did?

III. Conſider the time when our Saviour pronounced thoſe words, Matt. x. 32. 'Whoſoever ſhall confeſs me before men, him will I confeſs alſo before my Father which is in heaven: but whoſoever ſhall deny me before men, him will I alſo deny before my Father which is in heaven.' Had you heard him ſpeak after this manner, when as yet his diſciples were under no ſuch tryals, you would certainly have ſaid within yourſelf, If theſe ſpeeches of Jeſus are true, and if, according to his prediction, governors and kings undertake to ruin and deſtroy thoſe who ſhall profeſs themſelves his diſciples, we will believe (not only that he is a prophet, but) that he has received power from God ſufficient to preſerve and propagate his religion; and that

he would never talk in ſuch a peremptory and diſcouraging manner, were he not aſſured that he was able to ſubdue the moſt powerful oppoſition, that could be made againſt the faith and doctrine which he taught.

IV. Who is not ſtruck with admiration, when he repreſents to himſelf our Saviour at that time foretelling that his goſpel ſhould be preached in all the world, for a witneſs unto all nations, or as St. Origen (who rather quotes the ſenſe than the words) to ſerve for a conviction to kings and people, when at the ſame time he finds that his goſpel has accordingly been preached to Greeks and Barbarians, to the learned and to the ignorant, and that there is no quality or condition of life able to exempt men from ſubmitting to the doctrine of Chriſt? as for us, ſays this great author, in another part of his book againſt Celſus, 'when we ſee every day thoſe events 'exactly accompliſhed which our Saviour 'foretold at ſo great a diſtance: that his go-'ſpel is preached in all the world, Matthew 'xxiv. 14. That his diſciples go and teach all 'nations, Matthew xxviii. 19. And that thoſe, 'who have received his doctrine, are brought 'for his ſake before governors, and before 'kings, Matthew x. 18. we are filled with ad-'miration, and our faith in him is confirmed 'more and more. What clearer and ſtronger 'proofs can Celſus aſk for the truth of what 'he ſpoke?

V. Origen inſiſts likewiſe with great ſtrength on that wonderful prediction of our Saviour, concerning the deſtruction of Jeruſalem, pronounced at a time, as he obſerves, when there was no likelihood nor appearance of it. This has been taken notice of and inculcated by ſo many others, that I ſhall refer you to what this Father has ſaid on the ſubject in the firſt book againſt Celſus. And as to the accompliſhment of this remarkable prophecy, ſhall only obſerve, that whoever reads the account given us by Joſephus, without knowing his character, and compares it with what our Saviour foretold, would think the hiſtorian had been a Chriſtian, and that he had nothing elſe in view but to adjuſt the event to the prediction.

VI. I cannot quit this head without taking notice, that Origen would ſtill have triumphed more in the foregoing arguments, had he lived an age longer, to have ſeen the Roman emperors, and all their governors and provinces, ſubmitting themſelves to the Chriſtian religion, and glorying in its profeſſion, as ſo many kings and ſovereigns ſtill place their relation to Chriſt at the head of their titles.

How much greater confirmation of his faith would he have received, had he ſeen our Saviour's prophecy ſtand good in the deſtruction of the temple, and the diſſolution of the Jewiſh oeconomy, when Jews and Pagans united all their endeavours under Julian the

apoſtate, to baffle and falſifie the prediction? the great preparations that were made for rebuilding the temple, with the hurricane, earthquake, and eruptions of fire, that deſtroyed the work, and terrified thoſe employed in the attempt from proceeding in it, are related by many hiſtorians of the ſame age, and the ſubſtance of the ſtory teſtified both by Pagan and Jewiſh writers, as Ammianus Marcellinus and Zemath-David. The learned Chryſoſtom, in a ſermon againſt the Jews, tells them this fact was then freſh in the memories even of their young men, that it happened but twenty years ago, and that it was atteſted by all the inhabitants of Jeruſalem, where they might ſtill ſee the marks of it in the rubbiſh of that work, from which the Jews deſiſted in ſo great a fright, and which even Julian had not the courage to carry on. This fact, which is in itſelf ſo miraculous, and ſo indiſputable, brought over many of the Jews to Chriſtianity; and ſhows us, that after our Saviour's prophecy againſt it, the temple could not be preſerved from the plough paſſing over it, by all the care of Titus, who would fain have prevented its deſtruction, and that in ſtead of being re-edified by Julian, all his endeavours towards it did but ſtill more literally accompliſh our Saviour's prediction, that not one ſtone ſhould be left upon another.

The ancient Chriſtians were ſo intirely

perſuaded of the force of our Saviour's prophecies, and of the puniſhment which the Jews had drawn upon themſelves, and upon their children, for the treatment which the Meſſiah had received at their hands, that they did not doubt but they would always remain an abandoned and diſperſed people, an hiſſing and an aſtoniſhment among the nations, as they are to this day. In ſhort, that they had loſt their peculiarity of being God's people, which was now transferred to the body of Chriſtians, and which preſerved the church of Chriſt among all the conflicts, difficulties and perſecutions, in which it was engaged, as it had preſerved the Jewiſh government and oeconomy for ſo many ages, whilſt it had the ſame truth and vital principle in it, notwithſtanding it was ſo frequently in danger of being utterly aboliſhed and deſtroyed. Origen, in his fourth book againſt Celſus, mentioning their being caſt out of Jeruſalem, the place to which their worſhip was annexed, deprived of their temple and ſacrifice, their religious rites and ſolemnities, and ſcattered over the face of the earth, ventures to aſſure them with a face of confidence, that they would never be re-eſtabliſhed, ſince they had committed that horrid crime againſt the Saviour of the world. This was a bold aſſertion in the good man, who knew how this people had been ſo wonderfully re-eſtabliſhed in former times, when they were al-

moſt ſwallowed up, and in the moſt deſperate ſtate of deſolation, as in their deliverance out of the Babyloniſh captivity, and the oppreſſions of Antiochus Epiphanes. Nay, he knew that within leſs than a hundred years before his own time, the Jews had made ſuch a powerful effort for their re-eſtabliſhment under Barchocab, in the reign of Adrian, as ſhook the whole Roman empire. But he founded his opinion on a ſure word of prophecy, and on the puniſhment they had ſo juſtly incurred; and we find, by a long experience of 1500 years, that he was not miſtaken, nay, that his opinion gathers ſtrength daily, ſince the Jews are now at a greater diſtance from any probability of ſuch a re-eſtabliſhment, than they were when Origen wrote.

SECTION IX.

I. The lives of primitive Chriſtians, another means of bringing learned Pagans into their religion.
II. The change and reformation of their manners.
III. This looked upon as ſupernatural by the learned Pagans,
IV. And ſtrengthened the accounts given of our Saviour's life and hiſtory.

V. The Jewiſh prophecies of our Saviour, an argument for the heathens belief:
VI. Purſued:
VII. Purſued.

I. THere was one other means enjoyed by the learned Pagans of the three firſt centuries, for ſatisfying them in the truth of our Saviour's hiſtory, which I might have flung under one of the foregoing heads; but as it is ſo ſhining a particular, and does ſo much honour to our religion, I ſhall make a diſtinct article of it, and only conſider it with regard to the ſubject I am upon: I mean the lives and manners of thoſe holy men, who believed in Chriſt during the firſt ages of Chriſtianity. I ſhould be thought to advance a paradox, ſhould I affirm that there were more Chriſtians in the world during thoſe times of perſecution, than there are at preſent in theſe which we call the flouriſhing times of Chriſtianity. But this will be found an indiſputable truth, if we form our calculation upon the opinions which prevailed in thoſe days, that every one who lives in the habitual practice of any voluntary ſin, actually cuts himſelf off from the benefits and profeſſion of Chriſtianity, and whatever he may call himſelf, is in reality no Chriſtian, nor ought to be eſteemed as ſuch.

II. In the times we are now ſurveying, the Chriſtian religion ſhowed its full force

and efficacy on the minds of men, and by many examples demonſtrated what great and generous ſouls it was capable of producing. It exalted and refined its proſelytes to a very high degree of perfection, and ſet them far above the pleaſures, and even the pains of this life. It ſtrengthened the infirmity, and broke the fierceneſs of human nature. It lifted up the minds of the ignorant to the knowledge and worſhip of him that made them, and inſpired the vicious with a rational devotion, a ſtrict purity of heart, and an unbounded love to their fellow-creatures. In proportion as it ſpread through the world, it ſeemed to change mankind into another ſpecies of beings. No ſooner was a convert initiated into it, but by an eaſy figure he became a new man, and both acted and looked upon himſelf as one regenerated and born a ſecond time into another ſtate of exiſtence.

III. It is not my buſineſs to be more particular in the accounts of primitive Chriſtianity, which have been exhibited ſo well by others, but rather to obſerve, that the Pagan converts, of whom I am now ſpeaking, mention this great reformation of thoſe who had been the greateſt ſinners, with that ſudden and ſurprizing change which it made in the lives of the moſt profligate, as having ſomething in it ſupernatural, miraculous, and more than human. Origen repreſents this power in the Chriſtian religion, as no leſs wonderful than

that of curing the lame and blind, or cleanſing the leper. Many others repreſent it in the ſame light, and looked upon it as an argument that there was a certain divinity in that religion, which ſhewed itſelf in ſuch ſtrange and glorious effects.

IV. This therefore was a great means not only of recommending Chriſtianity to honeſt and learned heathens, but of confirming them in the belief of our Saviour's hiſtory, when they ſaw multitudes of virtuous men daily forming themſelves upon his example, animated by his precepts, and actuated by that ſpirit which he had promiſed to ſend among his diſciples.

V. But I find no argument made a ſtronger impreſſion on the minds of theſe eminent Pagan converts, for ſtrengthening their faith in the hiſtory of our Saviour, than the predictions relating to him in thoſe old prophetick writings, which were depoſited among the hands of the greateſt enemies to Chriſtianity, and owned by them to have been extant many ages before his appearance. The learned heathen converts were aſtoniſhed to ſee the whole hiſtory of their Saviour's life publiſhed before he was born, and to find that the evangeliſts and prophets, in their accounts of the Meſſiah, differed only in point of time, the one foretelling what ſhould happen to him, and the other deſcribing thoſe very particulars as what had actually happen-

ed. This our Saviour himſelf was pleaſed to make uſe of as the ſtrongeſt argument of his being the promiſed Meſſiah, and without it would hardly have reconciled his diſciples to the ignominy of his death, as in that remarkable paſſage which mentions his converſation with the two diſciples, on the day of his reſurrection. St. Luke, chap. 24. verſe 13, to the end.

VI. The heathen converts, after having travelled through all human learning, and fortified their minds with the knowledge of arts and ſciences, were particularly qualified to examine theſe prophecies with great care and impartiality, and without prejudice or prepoſſeſſion. If the Jews on the one ſide put an unnatural interpretation on theſe prophecies, to evade the force of them in their controverſies with the Chriſtians; or if the Chriſtians on the other ſide overſtrained ſeveral paſſages in their applications of them, as it often happens among men of the beſt underſtanding, when their minds are heated with any conſideration that bears a more than an ordinary weight with it: the learned heathens may be looked upon as neuters in the matter, when all theſe prophecies were new to them, and their education had left the interpretation of them free and indifferent. Beſides, theſe learned men among the primitive Chriſtians, knew how the Jews, who had preceded our Saviour, interpreted theſe pre-

dictions, and the ſeveral marks by which they acknowledged the Meſſiah would be diſcovered, and how thoſe of the Jewiſh doctors who ſucceeded him, had deviated from the interpretations and doctrines of their forefathers, on purpoſe to ſtifle their own conviction.

VII. This ſett of arguments had therefore an invincible force with thoſe Pagan philoſophers who became Chriſtians, as we find in moſt of their writings. They could not diſbelieve our Saviour's hiſtory, which ſo exactly agreed with every thing that had been written of him many ages before his birth, nor doubt of thoſe circumſtances being fulfilled in him, which could not be true of any perſon that lived in the world beſides himſelf. This wrought the greateſt confuſion in the unbelieving Jews, and the greateſt conviction in the Gentiles, who every where ſpeak with aſtoniſhment of theſe truths they met with in this new magazine of learning, which was opened to them, and carry the point ſo far as to think whatever excellent doctrine they had met with among Pagan writers, had been ſtole from their converſation with the Jews, or from the peruſal of theſe writings which they had in their cuſtody.

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